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By: E.I. Hillian, Phoenix Staff Writer

As e-cig use grows, so does talk of regulation

Electronic cigarettes are used as an alternative to tobacco, but some people want cities to regulate where the devices can be used.

“To ban these products will drive people back to smoking,” said Sean Gore, chairman of the Oklahoma Vapor Advocacy League, or OVAL.

Many cities are discussing ordinances to ban the use of e-cigs on city property as a safety measure for residents’ health. Some cities, including Tahlequah, have already passed such ordinances. Delbie Walker of the Muskogee County Health Department said that in August, the idea of banning e-cigs on city property was brought to the mayor of Muskogee.

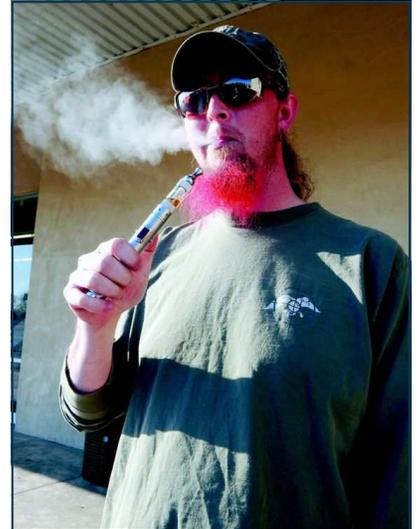
“Now that we have a new city manager, we will go and visit him,” Walker said.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Oklahoma tobacco smokers are declining—23.3 percent of Oklahoma residents smoked in 2012, down from 26.1 percent in 2011.

The number of retail stores carrying electronic cigarettes, also called “vapes,” is on the rise. Electronic cigarette sales tripled in 2013, making it a \$1.5 billion industry in the United States, according to Bloomberg Industry.

Gore said e-cigs are beneficial to people trying to quit using tobacco products.

Two main studies cited by Gore in his advocacy for e-cigs are the 2012 ClearStream-AIR study and Peering Through the Mist, conducted at Drexel University in 2013.



Len Kay of Muskogee exhales vapor from his electronic cigarette. Before he started to vape, Kay said, he smoked between a pack and a pack and a half per day. “I didn’t think I would give up the habit. If it weren’t for this, I wouldn’t have,” he said.

Mark Holinsworth, an employee at 918 Vapes in Muskogee, said the average users of the devices are not all young.



“They are late 30s to early 60s,” Holinsworth said. “We do have younger users—people who have decided to quit.”

Data from the 2013 Oklahoma Youth Tobacco Survey show that 7.8 percent of Oklahoma high school students and 2.7 percent of Oklahoma middle school students who responded to the survey had used an e-cigarette in the past 30 days.

Of those who responded, 17.9 percent of high school students and 6.6 percent of middle school students reported ever using an e-cigarette. The 2013 survey is the first year the survey has included a question about e-cigarette use.

“What they are failing to tell are the youth who are using already smoke. The youth that don’t smoke, aren’t picking up the e-cig,” Gore said.

But opponents say that the lack of Food and Drug Administration regulation of e-cigs poses a threat, especially to youths.

According to the World Health Organization, electronic cigarettes or ENDS (electronic nicotine delivery systems) are devices that vaporize and deliver to the lungs of the user a chemical mixture typically composed of nicotine, propylene glycol and other chemicals, although some products state they contain no nicotine. Each device contains an electronic vaporization system, rechargeable batteries, electronic controls and cartridges of the liquid that is vaporized.

Ingredients and their safety

Gore and employees at 918 Vapes said a maximum of five ingredients are in the liquids used in e-cigs, known as e-liquids.

One ingredient, propylene glycol, has created some confusion as to whether it is safe. The FDA has classified propylene glycol as an additive that is “generally recognized as safe” for use in food. It is used to absorb extra water and maintain moisture in certain medicines, cosmetics, or food products.

According to the FDA’s website, propylene glycol can be ingested over long periods of time and in substantial quantities (up to five percent of the total food intake) without causing frank toxic effects. At lethal or near lethal doses (6 g per kg or more), however, it has been reported to cause kidney damage in several species. There is no evidence in the available information on propylene glycol and propylene glycol monostearate that demonstrates, or suggests reason to suspect, a hazard to the public when they are used at levels that are now current or that might reasonably be expected in the future.

Another ingredient found in e-liquids is vegetable glycerin, an organic substance extracted from vegetable oils. Gore said it is of a sweet nature and of low toxicity and is widely used in pharmaceutical formulations.

The remaining ingredients are U.S. food grade flavorings, distilled water, and nicotine which is optional. Typically, e-cig users who choose to add tobacco into their e-liquid use between six and 24 mg.

“These five ingredients are what make up the e-liquids and should be the only ingredients allowed to make e-liquids. All these ingredients are approved by the FDA for human consumption,” Gore said.

The FDA, the World Health Organization, the American Lung Association, and other health organizations all agree on one thing about e-cigs. Nobody knows the potential harm that may be caused by using them.

Health vs. grant money

In Tahlequah, the Community Health Coalition of Cherokee County endorsed an ordinance to ban the use of e-cigs on city property. That ordinance, passed at a recent meeting, bans the use of electronic cigarettes on city-owned or city-operated property.

Muskogee Against Tobacco and Sequoyah (County) Wellness Partnership are part of Muskogee Turning Point and are administered through the Muskogee County Health Department. The funding for these coalitions and programs comes from the Tobacco Endowment Trust Settlement.

The Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust, or TSET, is a state agency that makes grants aimed at reducing the leading causes of preventable death in Oklahoma—cancer and heart disease—by focusing on tobacco use prevention and obesity prevention. Tracey Strader, TSET director, said her agency, in an effort to promote the certified health program, created the Incentive Grant program.

D’Elbie Walker oversees the Muskogee and Sequoyah counties’ programs.

For 2012, two grants were received for the Muskogee and Sequoyah county coalition.

“Our two grants make up the Turning Point Coalition,” Walker said.

The grant provided \$320,000 for the coalition, Walker said. A separate grant, the Fitness and Nutrition grant, provided \$120,000 from TSET.

In 2000, Oklahoma approved a constitutional amendment that allowed TSET to invest payments from the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement. TSET programs and grants are funded by the earnings from the endowment fund.

“E-cigs are the largest step forward in tobacco harm reduction in 50 years,” Gore said.

If tobacco sales go down, so does the amount of money into the trust by big tobacco companies, he said.

The Certified Healthy Oklahoma Business Program began in 2003 as a way to recognize businesses that were working to improve employee health. In 2010, House Bill 2774 created the Certified Healthy Schools and Communities Act. Colleges have also been added to that list.

For Muskogee to receive the maximum funding, \$120,000 from the Certified Healthy program, one criteria it must meet is be tobacco free.

Tobacco free, according to the Healthy Communities Incentive criteria, means “all city-owned/operated properties are tobacco free (indoors and outdoors) and includes chewing tobacco, snuff and e-cigarettes.”

Only communities that have received certification through the Certified Healthy Oklahoma program in 2013 are eligible to apply for Incentive grant funds in 2014, and Muskogee was deemed a Certified Healthy City in 2013.

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